

TITLE:

UNFIT FOR PRACTICAL PURPOSE: CRITICALLY EXAMINING THE CLAIMS TO VALIDITY OF MARKETING MANAGEMENT DISCOURSE

ABSTRACT

This paper critically evaluates the dominant discourse of academic marketing management which is held to be capable of structuring practice. In addressing this issue and the concerns of the marketing as practice track, this paper draws on critical theory, discourse analysis, and social constructionism. The latter involved carrying out two groups of in depth interviews with marketing managers. The latter's practice talk is taken as the object of inquiry. As theoretical structures facilitating investigation, the Habermasian notion of validity claims and the critical framework of Minger's (2000) are utilised, in order to discover what marketers say they do, as opposed to what the dominant discourse says they should do. Minger's identifies four different features of a critical approach. In terms of a critique of rhetoric, findings demonstrate that normative marketing is based on a poorly reasoned argument about the nature of managerial action, where little or no reference is made to the mental models that people in organisations work within. Secondly, a critique of the tradition of marketing management demonstrates that the boundaries of the right approach have been set by a powerful group who use the dominant discourse in a fashion that furthers their own ends. Thirdly, a critique of authority illustrates that the dominant discourse is seen as the one way to conceptualise marketing, whereas practitioners actually exhibit a range of alternative perspectives. Finally, a critique of objectivity shows that marketing management is not a pre-programmed, transferable technology, but is largely constituted by human agency. As a result of these findings, this paper contends that the dominant academic marketing orthodoxy does not meet the Habermasian claim to validity and is unfit for practical purpose. It is additionally argued that the orthodoxy is damaging, as it contributes to an impoverished understanding of marketing management practice.

KEY WORDS

Validity

Practice

Criticism

Social construction

MARKETING MANAGEMENT DISCOURSE: PRACTICE, CRITICISM AND VALIDITY CLAIMS

The purpose of this paper, which is structured by critical theory (Habermas 1992), discourse analysis (Alvesson, Kärreman.(2000), and social constructionism (Berger and Luckman 1966), is to raise a fundamental question about the status and validity of current orthodox marketing management theory and the extent to which it privileges, primarily, a functionalist view of knowledge. It is argued that the latter approach greatly impoverishes our understanding of marketing management practice. In attempting to deal with these issues, this paper draws on some original research in the area, which examines the practice talk of a small group of marketing managers. This emphasis on talk is indispensable, for as Turner (2001) points out, any account of practice that fails to account for language will be flawed. Whilst there has been recently a critical turn of thought in marketing, (see Brownlie et al 1999; Burton 2001; Sørensen et al 2007; Tadaejewski and Brownlie 2008), it is clear that much marketing scholarship at all levels, be it textbooks or journals, still takes for granted the universal applicability of a conventional strategic marketing technology, the discourse of which is about a process that is linear and technically rational (Wilson and Gilligan 2005; Hill et al, 1998; Philips et al, 2001). In much of the literature the model of marketing management that is presented is a very consistent one, applying to both large and small organisations alike and to all industry groupings (Brooksbank, 1996; Brown 2001). Relatively few published works on marketing management take issue with this mainstream thinking, exceptions include O'Driscoll and Murray (1998); Brownlie and Sørensen (1997;2004); Hackley (2000;2001; Skålén et al (2007).

Schatzki (2001), points out that one approach to studying practice, suggests a desire to free action from the grip of objectified systems and to examine individual activity. This does not

seem to be a concern of many mainstream marketing writers. Much of this discourse, be it textbooks or research about practice, is preoccupied with a realist position. Systemic approaches as theoretical structures are largely devoid of insights regarding how marketing is actually talked about and enacted. In addressing the concerns of this conference and the notion of marketing as practice, this paper seeks to make a contribution to debates about practice theory as well. In reflecting the latter concerns, Whittington (1996) notes that a key driver of the practice approach, is to take seriously the work and talk of the practitioner themselves, where the concern is to examine how managers actually 'do' strategy. This is an important endeavour, for as Schatzki et al (2001) point out, practice plays an important part in all our lives. In marketing, management discourse it is neglected; Hackley (2003), argues for example, that much academic marketing is replete with normative, prescriptions, while being largely bereft of true practical understanding. Questionable assumptions, models and reasoning appear to underpin the soundness of a perspective on management that is constantly reiterated in textbooks and research. This sort of concern about practice is picked up in the work of C Wright Mills (1970) who suggested that a concentration by social scientists on the development of totalising systemic views of society means that there is consequently an undue emphasis placed on grand theory and abstraction. What is neglected he suggests, are real world issues. Parallels exist here in regard to the mainstream marketing discourse. There is an attempt in the latter to ape the methods of the natural sciences leading to the development of broad generalisable theories as to the way the marketing world should function. Brown (2005) suggests one guilty party in this enterprise is Philip Kotler. Brown cites his attempts to widen the base of the marketing model, applying it, in a Marxist 'grand theory like style, to areas such as religion, education, the arts and social causes. Brown points out that for Kotler, a specific theory of marketing is there to serve society as a whole, just as Marx's model of historical materialism can arguably be used to transform the modes of production within different types of social formations (Poulantzas (1973).

What we have therefore in current marketing theory is a dominant discourse that orders perceptions, where there exists 'an invariable and privileged structure of predetermined categories' (Brownlie and Saren 2004, p2). This paper takes a critical perspective on these predetermined categories of marketing management theory, arguing that they lack validity in attempting to explain marketing phenomena. Validity is of course a term in widespread use by research communities, often referring to 'true' measurement of variables May (1997). In using the notion of validity here, it is something different. In exploring the issue of validity, this paper draws on the critical theory of Habermas (1992) and his notion of discourse ethics. In the latter, people try to influence each other by putting forward validity claims as communicative utterances. These should be comprehensible, factually true, right in a normative sense and sincere. Importantly, they should be open for contestation through sustained debate. This paper seeks therefore, to examine the validity claims of textual marketing both in terms of textbooks and mainstream research. These areas might appear dissimilar, but it is argued here they are actually mutually reinforcing elements of the same discourse.

ON BEING CRITICAL: MARKETING, MARX AND HABERMAS

There is a considerable amount of argument existing with regard to what actually constitutes critical marketing (see Brownlie (2006; Burton 2001). In terms of a background to this, Schroeder (2007) attempts to distinguish between two different strands of critical marketing thinking. One strand is associated with the Frankfurt school of Critical Theorists and the second, with a broader agenda which can include favouring a tendency towards phenomenological inquiry. This latter approach is regarded as harbouring scepticism to the US marketing priorities and is broadly supportive of historical sociological and political

readings of marketing. Brownlie and Hewer (2007), suggest that in the critical endeavour, space be left for many voices, other than those who advocate a strong rejection of current management thinking. Along similar lines, Burton (2000), points out that there is no one single united critical theory. The research of Schroeder (2007), suggests that a number of marketing academics regard pluralism as the force which should direct critical endeavours and that there is no one true definition of critical marketing. Scott (2007) is supportive of the view that being critical has to encompass more than varieties of Marxism. For her, 'criticality' means the acceptance of polyvalence in research and the 'relativist imperative' Scott (2007p16). The latter view allows consumers or managers to 'speak for themselves', in much the way suggested by Brownlie and Saren (1997) and Brownlie et al (1999).

It is generally accepted that critical theory has substantial roots in the Frankfurt school of the late twenties. The latter group originated in the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt University during 1923 (Brooke 2002). The work of the Frankfurt school was largely originally inspired by Marx, who was preoccupied with a structural analysis of capitalism (Marx and Engels 1968). Marx's theory of Historical Materialism attempted to show that contradictions exist within a society's mode of production, a situation that will ultimately result in class conflict over the ownership of resources (Giddens 1971). Early writers of the Frankfurt School - Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse - worked within this structural framework, arguing that the taken for granted beliefs about society, held by individuals, was largely shaped by historical and social contexts (Adorno and Horkheimer 1998; Horkheimer 1994). Key concerns were human freedom and the idea that these are restrained through structures of domination and repression (Brooke 2002; Callinicos 2007). The rationality of capitalism as a type of instrumental control was rejected and the market was seen to exist in order to exploit and to commodify existence (Grint 2005; Layder 2006; Alvesson and

Willmott 2000). In its original form, critical theory was posited as alternative to orthodox social science, the latter manifested by the approach of structural functionalism and positivism. Elements of both these approaches can however be seen to exist with the work of the Frankfurt School (Layder 2006). Generally though, the major developmental contribution of the latter was to move the debate from the productive and labour concerns of Marx, towards consumption and what were seen as its alienating and anomic effects on the individual (Marcuse 1964). Through this route, marketing management activity becomes a central area of concern.

A later key thinker of the Frankfurt school is Habermas (Alvesson and Willmott 2000). For Habermas, validity claims are expressed as a need for mutual understanding through undistorted language. A situation should be arrived at in the Habermasian lifeworld, where speaker and hearer are making claims to the effect that their expressions fit what is happening in the world. They should then settle and negotiate their differences, in order to reach a consensus, which might not necessarily mean an outright agreement. For Habermas (1992), the general theory of communicative action means that rationality can be built as long as it is able to be subjected to a critique which is discursively conducted. Validity claims can be made acceptable by recourse to the evidence. Generally, it is reasonably clear (Seidman 1998), that the work of Habermas comes close to the development of a grand theory of society, along the lines of a Parsonian project. Habermas, through his concerns with the development of theoretical typologies (as in the notion of purposive rational action) can be seen to be dealing in systematic and positivistic thinking (Brooke 2002; Seidman 1998). This approach might initially appear at odds with social constructionism. However, through the Habermasian notions of validity claims and the action oriented lifeworld, the interpretative project can be rescued. Habermas does recognise the importance of social action and the role

of language and meaning in the achievement of societal life as negotiated order. Importantly, those involved must sort out the accuracy and legitimacy of each other's opinions and evaluations. Dialogue, debate and dissent is encouraged by the use of the Habermasian validity framework, terms which appear to be missing from the mainstream marketing discourse. Arguably, from a social constructionist viewpoint, validity claims will always be a work in progress as the former clearly questions realist assumptions about the nature of the world (Reed 2005). The point here however is that the debate is the important thing and the opportunity to make spaces for alternative versions of reality.

MARKETING'S NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

Firstly, it is important just too briefly outline aspects of this mainstream marketing discourse, in terms of the key features. As Marion (2007) has noted very insightfully, the normative dominant logic of marketing is not about studying and explaining how marketing functions as a practice, but how it should actually work. The dominant orthodoxy of marketing regards the marketing plan and the marketing planning process as the fulcrum on which everything else is based. Marketing is visualised as being composed of a series of technical stages which if implemented correctly will lead to competitive advantage for the company concerned (McDonald 2007). This represents the classic rational approach to marketing. This should be underpinned by the existence of a shared ideology in the organisation; the belief that, if it is to be successful, then it must be market orientated and customer focussed. Alongside corporate planning and the setting of the firm's mission, the first formal step in marketing planning involves conducting a marketing audit. The latter brings together internal and external information on the organisations marketing environment and operations, its current objectives and strategies, with a view to identifying problem areas and opportunities. Subsequent to this, a range of planning tools is suggested for use, which assists the

organisation in market analysis and objectives and strategy setting. Recommended for use are tools like perceptual maps, segmentation analysis, the Boston matrix and the directional policy matrix. What follows this analysis process is the setting of new marketing objectives and the development of strategies based around the marketing mix. Projected income and expenditure is included in the marketing plan, along with appropriate control mechanisms (Wilson and Gilligan 2005). This approach is distinctly modernist (Hatch and Cunliffe (2006). It contains implicit assumptions regarding the functioning of organisations as rational entities, with marketing performing a set of clear goal oriented activities.

In the mainstream perspective, marketing appears to be composed of general laws and if these are not being presented in marketing textbooks, then the researcher is busy trying to uncover them empirically. This is a key point made by Tapp (2004) and Tapp and Hughes (2008). The latter articles are critical regarding marketing's attempts to generalise knowledge about practice. An example of the latter is supplied through the research writings of Gordon Greenley. Over a number of years, he has written extensively on the topic of marketing planning, see for example Greenley (1982; 1988); Greenley and Bayus (1993); Greenley et al (2004). A critical reading of Greenley's work suggests that it is informed by a meta theoretical functionalism and an ideological discourse that promotes a view of marketing that is universal, instrumental and hegemonic. Throughout Greenley's work there is an overriding concern with generalisability, where the latter becomes the only way to label something as meaningful theory. As Brown (2001p113) trenchantly points out, "perhaps the most incredible thing of all is that the promulgators of marketing planning place so little store by what is clearly a complex, convoluted and context dependent process." This paper will seek to show that this dominant approach to marketing management is a representational device, a mega discourse (Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) that entraps its followers within a simplistic framework. The latter largely

ignores social psychological and sociological issues in organisations, the language that managers work with and importantly, the impact of local contexts.

THE INTERVIEWS: BEYOND THE LANGUAGE OF NORMATIVE MARKETING THEORY

For Brownlie and Saren (2004p7), practitioners have “immanent and insistent experience and knowledge....which cannot be given expression through the received concepts and language of marketing.” In pursuit of this concern, this paper uses the findings of two separate studies, carried out at different times, but in the same locality. One group of in depth phenomenological interviews (Moustakas 1994), was completed with marketing managers representing a wide range of small, medium and large sized organisations. Featured here are extracts from a small number of interviews, where respondents and their organisations have been made anonymous. Jason Hobart is the marketing director of Stirling Publisher, a large organisation with a significant turnover. Clive Terry is sales and marketing manager at Thor Engineering, a small company that makes meat slicing equipment, with around a seven million turnover. David Borrows is marketing director of Leighton Jay Technical Services, another SME, a firm that produces educational software for schools and colleges. Robin Cawley who is interviewed, is marketing director of Nelson Universals, a large financial services firm. At Vincent Duke, Mike Clark is marketing manager also is interviewed. The latter firm is also a key player in the financial services market. Finally, there is an interview with Richard Coates, marketing manager at Everton’s, a firm of local solicitors. The other study, also phenomenological, draws on the perceptions of Edwin Ferris, marketing communications manager for ‘Flatfields’ FE College and Philip Haystead, a senior manager in the Business School at the institution. All these organisations are regarded as being relatively successful by the persons being interviewed. Taken together, the intention of these research projects was to

get access to a differentiated range of situations, in order to try and make sense of the perceptions of marketing managers' approaches to the implementation of marketing. In this respect, it was thought that there was no ideal number of companies to research, because it is suggested that each will have a unique approach to marketing and as Garfinkel (1984) points out, that in an interpretative study the aim is not to try and uncover some form of master reality.

Significantly, Brownlie (1997) argue that marketing managers are very skilful at using the vocabulary of academia when talking to researchers. The notion here is that to some extent the interviewer gets managed by the practitioner and the latter tells them the sorts of story they might want to hear. This approach is very much informed by an ethnomethodological concern, that the reporting of interview research is largely about what takes place in the interview itself, rather than the reproduction of truthful accounts about reality (Silverman 1993). Brownlie suggests that managers, when asked, will construct their answers using the 'techno' speak of marketing's dominant managerial discourse. Researchers go away happy, full of marketing stories couched in rational technical language. In the research study that this paper presents, this was not quite the case. The managers interviewed responded to questions about marketing with candour, surprisingly free of technical marketing language. This is despite the fact that they were familiar with the terms and their meaning. In using the language of discourse analysis, (Potter and Weatherell 1987; Watson 1995), a key repertoire here revolved around pragmatism and whilst there was no clear outright rejection of marketing's rational technical framework, it was evidently not the language of first resort. What the managers preferred to do, was to express their views in an intelligent lay language.

The reasons for the frankness of the interview material are an issue of speculation. Maybe respondents liked the open and reflective type of questions being asked about marketing in

their organisations. Possibly the letter sent out to all respondents asking them to 'tell it like it is' may have had some impact. Perhaps there was a feeling that the interviewer would 'see through' any attempts at an ideological, legitmatory presentation of marketing. What also helped to engage respondents was that in most cases, on a practical level, attempts at making connections were made prior to the interview stage, when arrangements for the latter were being organised. This involved telephoning and also talking to potential respondents and quite often this meant that some relaxed and informal conversations took place about the nature of the research. Interviews occurred in a comfortable setting, namely the manager's place of work, a point made by Thomas (1993a). This approach means the interviewee has some control over the proceedings. Perhaps the interviewed recognised an opportunity, presented by the questions, to construct a rhetoric which had them at the centre of things, rather than the organisation. What resulted were often long discussions about marketing, business problems and successes. Some interviews verged on the existential. This represented an expressed recognition that some things are always unknowable. One manager commented that the attempt to capture the world in normative marketing models.... "is only a piece of the answer because there is a lot more that you can't be clear about, there is no right or wrong, there is no absolute truth." The mundane aspects of everyday life a key feature of ethnomethodological inquiry (Hassard 1990; Garfinkel 1984) also came to the fore. The sometimes petty conflicts that make up daily activities were apparent in the interview material, a feature of our existence often overlooked in the grand narratives provided by marketing texts. One marketing manager expressed exasperation at what he saw as part of an internecine feud between him and those opposed to his attempts at making the organisation more customer centric. Part of his initiative involved redesigning the organisations entrance foyer, to include a display of,

“Plastic flowers. Might be wrong. But I know that the person who criticised the plastic flowers at a public meeting didn’t have the sense to realise that we had investigated live flowers and found that a, we couldn’t afford them... and b, they wouldn’t have lived in there. But instead of coming to us and saying, ‘excuse me why have you used plastic flowers’, they start screaming all over the country about plastic flowers. It’s a bloody sight better than nothing.”

MARKETING MANAGEMENT DISCOURSE: VALIDITY CLAIMS AND THE CRITICAL FRAMEWORK OF MINGERS

A useful framework for exploring Habermasian validity claims through critical argument is provided by Mingers (2000). In this section, the dominant marketing management discourse will be explored, using the latter’s framework. Minger’s initially developed his framework in order to propose a critical approach to management education. His intention was to develop an approach facilitating critical reflection on the material management students were being presented with in their programmes. To date, as far as the author knows, this framework has not been applied to marketing management and as a consequence, is worth exploring. In his article, Minger’s identifies four different features of a critical approach. A critique of *rhetoric* should be concerned with displaying a general scepticism towards the use of language and the manner in which it is deployed in support of arguments. At its most straightforward, this is concerned with asking whether or not arguments are sound, are based on reasonable assumptions, and are logical. The critique of *tradition* is concerned with the questioning of customs and taken for granted practices. The critique of *authority* questions the hegemony of a single viewpoint. Instead, it argues for accepting plurality of positions. Finally, the critique of *objectivity* denies the idea that there is pure value free knowledge, existing independently of established power relations.

A critique of rhetoric

The first of Minger's critical approaches to consider is the critique of rhetoric. In terms of the logicity and the justification behind the rhetoric of normative marketing, it is suggested that the prescriptive framework makes false assumptions about how people in organisations act. This paper suggests that we should be firstly, highly sceptical of prescriptive marketing theories rhetoric, because beneath its surface claims, it holds a doubtful view of the person. There exists as Hackley (2003) points out, an implied psychology of managerial action with little or no reference made to the mental models that managers work with. There is, in the prescriptively based marketing texts, for example, no acknowledgement of the discombobulating area of tacit knowledge (Baumard 1999; Hackley 1999; Ardley 2006). Whilst Collins (2001p107-8) recognises that tacit knowledge is 'ill defined and elusive', he also acknowledges it as a form of mastery of practice, covering those things that we 'know how to do'. In relation to this, Jason Hobart, marketing director of Stirling Publisher, makes the following comment.

"...having invested in research we have the results, or should have the results in order to make a thoroughly objective decision, that is what we are trying to do and that is especially important when you have to make 7,000 decisions a year on product, whether you launch a product or not. But at the end of the day, one of the many values of the publishing team...is they have a gut feel for what is going to work and what isn't going to work, and even at the micro level, looking at the cover of a book, they can sense whether it is going to work or not, so I believe there is a role for making those sort of judgement calls..."

These remarks seem to suggest that there is probably a strong tacit dimension to the role of marketing decision making, which is some way removed from the traditional model of marketing with the emphasis on articulated rational action. Polanyi (1967) was the first to introduce this concept, expressing it in the statement that we know more than we can say.

Whittingdon (1996) argues that practical competences often require a readiness to operate within existing systems and ways of doing things, rather than using the knowledge of a textbook. This suggests that what might work well in one context, will not do so in another and that the craft skills of a particular role are not generalisable, but tacit. Hackley (1999) has argued that the tacit area of practical knowledge refers to action which is left out of abstracted theoretical descriptions, but on which the accomplishment of activity depends. He goes on to point out that a person who is highly accomplished in strategic marketing decision making, is likely to be able to utilise sophisticated and experientially mediated concepts in coping with marketing issues. Knowledge is often personal and subjective. A consequence of this is that each marketing manager has a reservoir of wisdom which is indexically embedded within the context of their own organisation. For Brownlie and Spender (1995) at the heart of practitioner knowledge in marketing is judgement, a process which is invested in local action. It is knowledge about dealing with the situation as it is now. To use judgement, means to respect the individuality of the situation and this is a tacit accomplishment; but the issue is – where does it feature in marketing's normative discourse?

In support of this line of reasoning, Alvesson (1998), in an ethnographic study of work in an advertising agency, noted that doing the job is reported to call for intuition and feeling, that problem-solving is not tangible or concrete, and results are ambiguous, a matter of attitudes, opinions, and other emotional reactions. Anti-bureaucratic ideals were said to dominate the workplace. Certainly, this is only one contextual example, but Maclaren and Catterill (2000) and Maclaren and Stevens (2008), argue that marketing practice in reality is emotional and subjective. These features often get overlooked, as much research into marketing is focused mainly on testing and refining current prescriptive theory. The faulty premises of a linear rational approach to planning are also raised by Weick (1995). He notes that individuals in

organisations are in a perpetual state of 'throwness' where they are never at the end or the beginning of things but always in the middle. Identity, action and the world are constantly in a state of flux.

The false reasoning of prescriptive theory can also be questioned in terms of when we think about people acting out in cultural settings. The linear model of marketing planning is based not only on shared notions regarding the supposed applicability of a range of marketing techniques, but also on a supposedly shared cultural vision of customer centeredness and marketing orientation. However, as Weick (1995) points out, shared meanings in organisations are difficult to obtain because people have different prior experiences which they then label in an idiosyncratic fashion.

This last point is well articulated by Richard Coates, marketing manager at Everton's a legal firm. He points to the fact that there exists differing views of what marketing actually is within an organisation that is made up not only of lawyers, but also includes office staff and accountants.

"...Some will associate marketing with getting articles in the newspaper, taking someone out to lunch or having the odd bit of sponsorship. Others will recognise this as much more analytical and will see it as much more involved..."

This perspective provides a problem for traditional normative theory, which sees the implementation of a wholly realised marketing culture as generally unproblematic, based as it is, within a functionalist framework (Smircich 1983). The work of Harris and Ogbonna (1999) highlight the extent to which the prescriptive literature on achieving a marketing orientated culture is basically unsound. In particular, their research points out the importance of different organisational conditions and the problems of building consensus among disparate interest

groups who have diverse perceptions of the organisation. Put simply, part time cashiers in a retail organisation probably have different work values and by implication, diverse reasons for being at work, compared to the senior marketing director. At the College, the director of marketing communications, Edwin Ferris, notes the extent to which marketing itself is a site of criticism, and conflict. Within the College, some staff are clearly hostile to marketing and its discourse.

“there is even arrogance against the intrusion of the academic world by people such as myself...it is true to say that the very essence of marketing personnel is an affront to them....and where the lecturing staff have always remained in the educational system from their own school days, college days, university, there is less understanding of marketing.”

Marion (1993) and Thomas (1993b) both support the notion that the traditional prescriptions of marketing are inadequate, because the aims of organisations and their members are not in fact given, in any systemically determined way. Hackley (2003p1327) makes a telling point that “marketing management texts work up a managerial world devoid of discordance and awash with manufactured consensus.” The contrary nature of organisational politics a feature routinely ignored in many marketing texts, is given expression by Robin Cawley, of Nelson Universals, who indicates the impossibility of ensuring that everyone adheres to one particular perspective. Even if there is no antipathy to marketing itself, discord can exist in terms of what its priorities are and how these should be implemented

" I use an analogy of iron filings and a magnet. If you could run a magnet over all staff and get everyone focused on the one thing this company would be unbeatable. And any other company would be. The problem is you can't do it, you can't actually get everybody lined up behind one thing..."

A critique of tradition

In terms of Minger's second area of critique, it is possible to question the dominant tradition of marketing management. Mingers (2000), notes that the boundaries of what constitutes the right approach are often set by technical experts who as a powerful group, limit the ways in which perspectives are debated and challenged. In the case of marketing management, it can be argued that a particular approach, namely empirical realism (Reed 2005), has developed over time, which supports a particular methodology and way of thinking. Most texts and research into marketing do not question the taken for granted assumptions about how things should be done; to do this would be to threaten the dominant position of existing influential views and modes of learning about marketing. This point is evidenced by one highly influential figure in mainstream marketing, Malcolm McDonald. His book on marketing planning (McDonald 2007) is the very apotheosis of universalism, now in its 6th edition. The simple marketing planning framework that is universally prescribed ignores major differences that exist in firms in terms of size, organisational structure and the discourses of marketing that take place within them. For Hackley (2003), the dominant marketing management discourse privileges a particular view of the world, one which is produced and sustained in many texts. That this textually based marketing exerts a powerful influence over those who have studied it is undeniable. Jason Hobart, of Stirling Publisher, is keen to show how important rational marketing knowledge is to his organisation, in terms of its rhetorical function and ability to sustain the interests of an existing status quo. Whether the discourse that he refers to is actually used in marketing practice, as opposed to being represented in a plan, is open to question however. Jason was asked to what extent analytical tools were used in his plan.

“Yes, I would say that the Boston matrix is used everywhere, in fact everything is a two by two matrix and if you turn to our business plan, you would see that our business plan starts off with a

Porter analysis, you know all the threats, internal, external. You would find there is quite a lot of classic marketing thinking here, partly because a lot of people have come in.... from other big companies...our chief executive is from Giant Marketing Textbooks, and has therefore been responsible for producing a lot of the classic marketing texts, so he is quite keen we should practice what we preach. So yes, we follow the classic line, one of my opposite numbers in another part of our organisation, is a Harvard Business MBA and therefore his market plan is going to look like something that comes out of Harvard, it is going to be that sort of classic document, I would hope.”

This is a very interesting piece of text. Evidently there are some contradictions here, to the extent that in an earlier section as noted above, Jason pointed out the significance of the non rational, the intuitive approach, in the making of marketing decisions. What this quote does show is the power of the text expressed through acquired knowledge, to legitimate a position of power within the organisation. Jason’s company, along with Giant Marketing Textbooks, produces work which secures their position within a market and within business schools. Here we have an example of Mingers (2000p226) ‘powerful groups’ who have a vested interest in maintaining existing traditions. Applied to marketing, these groups are generally constituted by business consultants, publishers, text authors, and the business schools that exhibit popular notions of the discipline. The Harvard MBA employee referred to by Jason above, is hardly likely to start to question openly the fundamentals of a rhetoric that has delivered to him a very senior position in a top UK publishing company. He will use the dominant rhetoric of marketing as a self serving piece of discourse. Potter and Weatherel (1987) note that discourse can perform different types of acts and here, the dominant discourse of marketing is being used to serve a particular interest. As Whittingdon (1993) has pointed out, managers with MBAs can reflexively call on the ideological resources of their profession, where the value of an award is essentially

about packaging, rather than content. This is less about technical answers to problems, than about the enhanced legitimacy won by a lustrous display of knowledge. Significantly though, Potter and Weatherel (1987) also note that descriptions of a thing can contain inconsistencies in that texts can have interesting contradictions. As an example, the comments of Jason Hobart, taken together, appear to be composed of an intuitive - rational divergence, in terms of explaining marketing. Here, a social constructionist – discourse perspective can show, unlike other forms of research, how certain defined categories i.e. marketing, can be described in one way at one time, then in another way, at another time.

A critique of authority

The third critical area that Minger's article throws up is about authority, which is linked to tradition. There is little doubt that the normative view of marketing planning held by writers such as Greenley, regard it as the authoritative perspective, which should not be open to serious challenge. The discourse of marketing management actively promotes itself as *the* framework; often denigrating alternative perspectives (see McDonald 2003). It is the text based approach that many consultants will use when going into companies (Brown 1995). Few authoritative based texts or articles on marketing management would think of beginning with the notion that marketing is about what the organisational members think it is and then work within that perspective. This section is critical of the one view of marketing, positing the argument that in the world of practice, marketing is no more or no less than what people say it is. Even those operating within the action research approach, supposedly working on individual company issues, often think they have the right answer to marketing problems. There is a belief that the actors in these firms just need to be brought round to seeing how marketing can be properly thought about and implemented (see Wilson 2004). As Hamersley (2004p174) notes, action research is 'inquiry-subordinated- to- another- activity'. In the case of action research in

marketing, it is usually inquiry in the context of improving conventional marketing management processes. What is needed is perhaps recognition that marketing knowledge can be constituted by many different and possibly divergent perspectives. The traditional approach to marketing may not be the most appropriate way to approach practice however. That the normative framework in fact can quickly break down, is suggested by Clive Terry of Thor Engineering, when he talks about a consultant who was brought in to provide marketing advice to his meat slicing company. This not only seems to confirm an earlier point made in this paper about the tacit and recondite nature of marketing knowledge, but it also shows that marketing is very much an activity best understood in the context of a local logic of action.

“Our marketing chap came in, and one of the first things he did was say, ‘look there seems to be so much black art in this company, in slicing generally, I am going to put together a catalogue for a salesman to go out and ask the right questions’... but the problem with that is it varies from one factory to another...I suppose to some extent it does tend to be a black art. As I say, half a dozen customers can be doing the same thing, manufacture the same product, but they are all doing it in a slightly different way, and their way is best...”

There exists a strong argument which suggests that it is local knowledge and local conditions, and the specific organisational contexts that mediate the marketing function (Carson and Gilmore 2000; Hills et al 2008; Hackley 2001). This indicates that there can be no general, workable theory of marketing when every situation is differently constructed and interpreted by organisational actors. Practice can be seen as involving quite abstruse processes at times, resistant to disentanglement from locally contingent thinking. For Dunne (1999), at the heart of practitioner knowledge is judgement, what he terms the predicament of practice, that is, knowing when and how deal with the situation as it currently is. Richard Coates of the legal firm

Evertons, commented in the interview that he was abruptly and unexpectedly asked by Nelson Universals to pitch for their work.

“There is a degree of reacting to opportunities, Nelson Universals suddenly ask us to pitch for their work. A lot of resources. When you are into that effort, other things have to take a back seat to some extent.”

Another good example of the need to respond ‘lithely’ to changing customer demands is provided by the following extract from a recent edition of *The Marketer*, (Barda 2008, p26-9). This is a largely practitioner oriented magazine produced for the Institute of Marketing. In the magazine, there is an interview with Ian McNought, marketing and design manager of Pearl and Dean, the well known cinema advertising company. The interviewer brings the assumptions of the discourse of traditional marketing theory to the exchange, couching their questions in terms of conventional marketing principles, using terms like plans, targets, and objectives. When asked about the area of objectives, McNought responded by saying that he tore up the list of marketing objectives the company had when he first became marketing manager, because everything is.. “too fluid to set out something in January that we would follow for the rest of the year” When then asked if McNought knew whether or not by doing this he can tell whether or not targets were being met, the response was that... “ we don’t really have targets...it’s more organic – whatever the business needs at a given moment”

The perspectives presented here on marketing represent another discourse; one that questions the authority of the dominant textual model, a model which asserts that action has to be shaped not by what is happening now, but by something written the past, i.e. the marketing plan. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to suggest then that the way in which actors define elements of the discourse they work with on a daily basis, informs practice. Clive Terry the marketing and sales manager of Thor Engineering, a manufacturer of meat slicing equipment said that

marketing is, simply, “Exploring the needs of manufacturers and gearing our design efforts to solve their problems.” This pithy definition suggests that the sense of any object is derived from its context, or is ‘indexed’ to a particular situation. This ethnomethodological insight, where meaning is seen as being dependent on the context of production (Hassard 1990), is largely ignored by normative marketing management texts. At the College, this point is taken up by a senior manager in the Business school. He is aware that staff with responsibilities for marketing in his area, do not have a lot of time for traditional theory. These represent staff with knowledge and experience of commerce. They manage vocational courses and might be expected to embrace elements prescriptive theory, but in the context of their own practice, apparently do not.

“I don’t think that staff are in the market for a lot of theoretical models about how marketing strategies work, or what buzzwords you might use. I don’t think that is what is necessary. I think that what people want is some candid advice as to how they might go about marketing the college, or marketing the course.”

It may be the case that the course managers being discussed here are looking beyond prescriptive theory, to insights drawn from the practical domain, where as Brown (2008) points out, many successful marketers carry out their actions and discourse in a way that runs counter to the conventional wisdoms of marketing. As an example Brown (2008) suggests that people like Michael O’Leary of Ryanair, Steve Jobs of Apple and Madonna, far from being customer focused as the textbooks suggest, are in fact customer opposed, yet still enjoy success. For example, Steve Jobs through purposefully engineered shortages, designed to keep customers keen, carries out no prior marketing research.

A critique of objectivity

The fourth and final aspect of Minger's critiques concerns issues at the very heart of the modernist marketing discourse, namely a belief that it is possible to view marketing as an objective technology to be turned on or off at will. This approach is probably deeply flawed however. In a commentary on marketing planning, Brown (2001), points out the inherent contradictions in a discipline which on the one hand, exhorts companies to differentiate their offering, and on the other hand, extols managers to dispense every marketing plan into a similar mechanistic mould. Despite the glaring problem this throws up, the conventional language and discourse of marketing management has little time for a view which suggests that reality is not in fact a single external world amenable to manipulation and control by a set of objective analytical marketing tools. This represents the empirical realist idea that the social world can be captured and measured in an unambiguous fashion. In terms of the mainstream approach to marketing, it is constituted by an established body of knowledge, where there exists given, valid material that is presented to practitioners and would be marketing practitioners. This then must be mastered and packaged. Brownlie and Saren (1997), point out that the marketing manager's role is represented in this way in objective terms as a straightforward model of analysis, planning and control. This is presented in the discourse as a pre-programmed technology that can be easily manipulated in order to bring about desired results. Boden (1994) indicates that this systemic based perspective means that social actors rarely get seen because they are controlled by the collectivities of which they are an unsuspecting part. We need to look no further than texts on marketing planning (see Wilson and Gilligan 2005) to see that this confirms the case. These texts are about regularities in behaviour and the pursuance of general marketing laws. The person becomes totally immersed within a universal planning system. As Brown (2008) points out, in academic marketing, structure dominates over agency.

People disappear into the walls of the organisation, subsumed by elements of the external environment, the components of the marketing mix and the five forces that effect competition. On the contrary, it can be argued that it is human agency that largely constitutes the organisation (Silverman 1970). That the organisation is in fact inextricably tied to with the personalities of its leaders is given voice by Mike Clark marketing manager of Vincent Duke which not only operates in the financial services markets but has interests elsewhere as well. When talking about the firm's managing director Mike says that,

“the reason why Brian has been outrageously successful as an entrepreneur is that he has just stuck with...basic rules, and when you talk to him, it really is as basic as, is there an industry that there is this opportunity to do a better job for the customer in, that we can make money and somehow suits our brand in some way and that I can have some fun in...”

The conventional marketing discourse that is promulgated then, does not take into account the broader social aspects of language and individual practices that make up the everyday organising activities of individuals. That the latter is routinely ignored by texts and research into marketing becomes evident when we think about the manner in which the external environment is analysed. A central tenet of the mainstream approach to marketing management is based on one which suggests the environment can be unambiguously defined and then analysed in an objective manner. Speed (1994) throws some doubt on the ability of the conventional linear marketing planning process to capture what is going on in the environment. Brownlie (1996), questions the assumption that the marketing audit is a neutral device for analysing the environment, which somehow escapes manipulation. Similarly, Astley (1985), and Smirch and Stubbart (1985), also argue that the environment is subjectively perceived and constructed by organisational members as individual acts of sense making. The social knowledge of managers becomes their environment. The latter is not some concrete material

object. This issue is rarely explored in marketing management studies. Research conducted by Knibbs et al (1987), however, clearly highlights how different managers within the same organisation construct significantly different organisational analyses, even though they are all supposedly describing the same external environments. If managers do not notice, or are not concerned by certain environmental events, then they will not be acted upon (Weick, 1995). Interpretations become important to the extent that they represent managers individually drawn representations of events. Robin Cawley, a marketing director at Nelson Universals financial services, gives expression to this perspective, when responding to a question about doing environmental analyses.

"We ought to do those, but the overhead of having a team of people doing that, and the value you get out of it, relative to the value you would get by just making a fairly instant decision on where the world is, it is very difficult to square the value with the cost. So whilst we do acknowledge the fact that the political situation has an impact on our business, as does the economy, in fact very much so, the economy on claims cost, the fact that socially there are more houses with single adults living in them, technologically people are buying more high tech equipment and using it to access services for instance, we do recognise all of that, but we don't try to formalise it into 'here's a book' that tells you where the world is, because by the time you have read it, it has moved anyway."

Another aspect of the pre-programmed technology that Brownlie and Saren (1997) criticise is the notion that it is axiomatic to the mainstream approach that organisations must use a range of analytical tools in the process of making marketing decisions, see for example Greenley et al (2004). Whilst these can be expected to help the marketing competitive analyst, managers in this study reported that decisions are based on an alternative intuitive style, rather than on rational

models. At Vincent Duke, a major financial services company, the marketing manager indicated that strategic thinking does not primarily come from the planning tools.

"Just thinking as individuals ourselves, what do we believe consumers would want? And because the industry is so far away from that basic understanding, the amount of science, or technique we have to apply, to do much better than what they have done, is minimal, so we haven't really had to get into too much of the little tools and mechanisms and things that the marketing academic side of things can equip you with...the fact that we haven't had to get overly analytical about it...most of us really do our marketing thinking by just imagining how we would feel as a customer, and that has given us an awful lot of what we need to know and understand, to move the company on."

No recourse is being made to academic frameworks as ways to deal with marketing. What we have is some access to the 'other' important dimensions of experience that Brownlie and Saren (2004) say is beyond the normative marketing discourse. These are areas such as judgement and experience points noted earlier. Brownlie and Spender (1995), argue that many normative marketing techniques of analysis collapse anyway, in their role as prescriptions for action, because they are used out of context to deal with uncertainties they have no ability to lessen.

David Borrows, marketing director of Leighton Jay Technical Services, captures this point. This example suggest that it is almost as if two discourses on the nature of marketing practice are being brought into sharp conflict, where one barely recognises the structure and significance of the other.

" One of the things I have found, in bringing people to work for us, people have a got a degree in marketing, they have done the classic stuff, and they come in and create a marketing plan, and

you look at it and straight off you know it is not going to work. It just doesn't relate to the market place. The people you sell to just don't need the sophistication of that sort of proposal and it is very difficult to justify some of the things they want to do, in terms of our internal budget structure."

CONCLUSION: THE TURN TO PRACTICE AND THE REJECTION OF MARKETING MANAGEMENT'S TEXTUAL CLAIMS TO VALIDITY

"I think always the main difference between textbooks and reality is that one can't stop the world to put in place some of the textbook approaches and textbook solutions, because life goes on and there is always greater pressure to do things." Richard Coates, marketing manager, Evertons solicitors.

Bettany (2007), in commenting reflexively on her own critical PhD thesis was worried about simplifying her disciplinary colleagues work. This sentiment is an important one. But then this sort of criticism can be raised against mainstream approaches to marketing. For it too can be accused of simplicity, of failing to embrace the complexity and ambiguity of the world. These elusive factors are surely central to the 'things' that Richard Coates's speaks about, being axiomatic aspects of practice. Which is more of serious of the critiques? This paper has argued for the latter. Central to this paper has been the idea of exploring notions of validity claims as espoused by Habermas and then framed by Minger's criteria. In terms of its utility for practice, the research carried out for this paper argues that marketing's dominant discourse is unfit for practical purpose. Marketing's orthodoxy claim to validity has been questioned and then rejected, on a number of grounds. Firstly, the rhetoric is shown to be unconvincing and based on false assumptions. There is no understanding of the mental models that managers and their employees work with. Secondly, the critique of tradition shows the dominant discourse serving to act to advance the interests of those using it. This discourse actually sheds little light on the

nature of practice and practice talk itself becomes marginalised. Thirdly, the critique of authority illustrates that there is no room for alternative perspectives, when in actuality marketing is a multifaceted, essentially localised phenomenon. In various approaches to social theory, like ethnomethodology (Hassard (1990), this is a point well recognised. It is also apparent in the work of Lyotard for example, who additionally argues for the specificity of situations and the tentative, non generalisable nature of the world (Seidman 1998). Finally, there is a critique of objectivity in Mingers framework, and applied to marketing, this demonstrates that the dominant model has a false conception of how reality is constituted. There is not one objective pre programmed technology of marketing management, where a totalising and functionalist approach works in all situations. This systemic approach does not correspond to the reality of practitioner's worlds; marketing gets constituted in different ways by managers with the latter possessing diverse sets of agendas.

Importantly, for the debate about practice, marketing managers inhabit a realm of meaning that is locally constructed - a point overlooked by the vast majority of marketing texts. Most of the latter operate within a simplistic systems model of the organisation with individuals having predetermined and unproblematic roles. This reflects the practice as universal theory approach of mainstream marketing. In regard to this, Knorr Cetina (2001), notes that many current conceptions of practice emphasise its rule governed features. But we have to ask - whose rules? There are endlessly repeated assertions in the mainstream discourse about what should happen in organisations doing marketing. This is an impoverished perspective however, composed of a set of rules rarely evident in practice. Marketing managers do not act on broad rule based generalisations about things like the product life cycle, portfolio analysis and linear planning processes, nor do they need statistically significant empirical studies on which to base their actions. As social construction, marketing may be no more or no less than the way it is talked

about as a local, highly differentiated practice, a contention that prescriptive texts and much research in the area is likely to be deeply unhappy about. With regard to these prescriptive texts, it is interesting to note that the American sociologist C Wright Mills (1970p99) has pointed out that the sociology textbook “readily become a rather mechanical gathering of facts to illustrate more or less settled conceptions.” Clearly, many years later, this type of criticism can be levelled at marketing textbooks, where facts are assembled, vignette style, in order to ‘prove’ the existence of marketing principles. As C Wright Mills points out later in his book, the research possibilities of new ideas are not usually considered very important to put into textbooks. This resonates with of marketing similarly, as the four Ps approach for example, is still very firmly entrenched, despite sustained criticism of its utility (see Piercy 2002, Brown 1995).

So, as was pointed out in the introduction section here, in comments on Schatzki (2001), one aim of studying practice is to liberate action from the grasp of objectified systems represented by these textbooks and much research into marketing. It is argued here that the marketing orthodoxy lacks validity because it privileges one type of textual discourse over others, where there is no room for a local practice talk. The latter is often seen as an aberration, a result of a failure to understand marketing, or the problem of a lack of requisite skills (McDonald 2007). Alternatively, the arguments made here suggest that a social constructionist take on marketing management does envision alternatives, which could be meaningfully examined with a view to incorporating them into a body of new ideas about marketing and marketing practice. Currently, marketing’s entrenched interests, representing tradition and authority, deny the possibility of a different set of discourses. Critical material is often rejected as it undermines the mainstream ‘project’. With some few exceptions, tradition and authority also demands that research into marketing legitimises a mainstream agenda, with leading journals advancing a model of marketing based on existing, established textual theory, a theory that is always seeking relevant,

performative based, generalised answers. Dominant groupings are served ideologically by the apparent objectivity in research and writing, so any notions of validity in this respect are flawed. Models of marketing presented as a local enactment, as a social construction, as non generalisable, is a risky proposition, despite the fact that in many cases, the marketing pedagogy is not supplying practitioners or students, or indeed social theorists, with a realistic view of the business world.

Importantly, as Whittington (1996) notes, a key implication of the practice perspective is open for the academic community to address. Teaching marketing as practice suggests that what must be communicated effectively to learners is how people perform in the workplace, where there is a reliance on craft skills that are essentially tacit and local. As Whittington (1996) goes on to point out, business educators need therefore to understand things not only in the abstract, but in terms of how individual practitioners operate within their own particular area. Encouragingly, in marketing, some work is taking place in this area. Fleisher and Wright (2008) are embarking on a major funded study of the teaching of pragmatic approaches to marketing and competitive analysis. Their early work has identified a continuum of skills encompassing some of the craft knowledge necessary for the effective practice of marketing. In this respect, the area of judgment in strategic marketing, discussed more than once in this paper, provides a good example of a locally produced craft skill of the type to be investigated (Dunne 1999).

Finally, we return here to the original issue of validity. The latter formed, alongside the practice debate and social constructionism, the key drivers of this paper. It was argued at the start of this paper that the present dominant discourse of marketing management is not a particularly critical one. What are the implications of this? One suggestion is that non marketers like Habermas for example, could paradoxically, have a central role to play in future pedagogic developments of the marketing discipline, in the context of the notion of competing validity claims and the

`democratisation' of the discipline. What is important is that a critical debate gets opened up, so that marketing becomes a construction site of knowledge and understanding, always in progress and always being created in conditions of dialogue, debate and dissent. Through this approach, marketing's differentially constituted discourses could in future, readily respond to the challenge posed to it now, by the `turn towards practice' theme of this paper and the concerns of this conference track.

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